

*Social Media with a Studio Potter*

Before I used social media, and before I worked as a full time studio artist, I was a co-founder of a non-profit community arts center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. One of my first, and ongoing, roles in the Union Project organization was as a community organizer and volunteer coordinator. This was before the days of Facebook, Mailchimp, Etsy, or smart phones. I spent many hours listening to community members in conversation, sending letters through the US Mail service, and maintaining a physical presence in the community.

This community organizing and the meticulous effort that went into building healthy relationships were some of the most rewarding aspects of the job, but also some of the most challenging. However, when nurtured correctly, these relationships formed the foundation for success in both business and personal capacities.

As a whole, I think social media and face-to-face interactions and relationships are successful for many of the same reasons:

- kindness
- regular and dedicated interaction
- honesty
- willingness to learn, grow, and understand
- two way communication with genuine feedback.

I make an effort on social media to engage with others, respond to questions, and maintain a regular presence. I try to respond to sincere emails, phone calls, and sales inquiries

within 48 hours. These are all things I did in business practices before social media existed, and continue to do with social media and business everyday.

There are some differences between the virtual and the face-to-face; most notably that nuance gets lost. Comments can be easily misinterpreted when there's no personal connection or accompanying facial expression. Things such as “likes” and “friends” mean different things to different people. Social media conversations are often one-sided. They are easily interrupted, distracted, or even missed completely. This can lead to even further challenges and misinterpretations of the relationship. Just as friendships are difficult to maintain without regular communication, regular online communication can be difficult without some face-to-face interaction.

I set up my business Facebook page about 5 years ago (in 2009) as “Justin Rothshank Ceramics.” This continues to be the collection point for much of my social media presence. I began using Instagram as @jrothshank about 2 years ago (in 2012), and almost immediately this became my favorite social media platform. As a person motivated by images, colors, and easy technology, Instagram continues to be the social media platform I spend the most effort on.

I've also set up accounts on other platforms, including Tumblr, Pinterest, YouTube, Google Plus, and blogs, but I spend very little time in these places. I am just getting started on Twitter. I've kept my username consistent, jrothshank, whenever possible.

I use Etsy every day. I set up my Etsy account in 2008, and began using it regularly about 18 months later. As a less conventional social media platform, I find that Etsy boosts my online presence significantly, and operates in a capacity similar to other social media apps. Additionally,

Etsy, both formally and informally, links to my social media pages to allow an easy transition for sales of my work.

Social media is free to use, has a world-wide network, and is instantaneous. There has never been an easier way to show your work to the world and gain feedback, customers, and new networking opportunities. I find that my ability to coordinate Instagram, Facebook, Etsy, and my daily studio work is one of the major reasons I'm able to pursue a successful full-time studio practice.

Because I'm a small business owner I'm responsible for all aspects of my business. I make pots, mop floors, pack boxes, haul clay, shoot photos, do marketing, and provide customer service, among other things. I don't have a show room in my studio. Instead, I have an iPhone, a photo booth, and a laptop computer. Social media is my store front. Facebook is my marketing department, Instagram is my shelving, and Etsy is my checkout counter.

It is not uncommon for me to unload a brand new pot from the kiln, walk it to my photo booth, shoot a photo with my iPhone and post it on Facebook, Instagram and Etsy, then sell it within minutes. All this can happen before the pot is even completely cool from the firing! Never could I have imagined such direct access to my personal networks at such a low cost and fast pace before the existence of these social media tools.

While social media can be perceived as a popularity contest (and perhaps it is at times), I think it is more importantly a tool and a network that can be used and cultivated as much or as little as you need. As a small business owner, I want to be "popular." This is good marketing. As

a whole, I'm looking for ways to get my work seen by the broadest possible audience and social media is the easiest way to do this.

I use social media nearly every day, and often several times a day. Its integrated into my daily routines just like checking my email, changing the radio station, washing the dishes, or loading a kiln. Although I'm deliberate about my social media posts, they almost never take me more than a minute or two to prepare. In fact, I often move on to other things if I find I'm spending more than that at any given time.

I do pay close attention to when I make a post; to what the content is, and how many times I'm posting per day. I look at stats and trends to try and learn what type of posts people respond to so that I can continue to have an impact with the information I'm putting out.

If I'm going to make a post, I want it to reach the widest audience possible. I want to make myself known. I've chosen to "opt-in" to social media, which gives me my own platform to tell my own stories. Others choose to "opt-in" to my feed, thus allowing me to make myself known to them. I try to curate my social media presence in a way that lets others see my process, my mistakes, my studio practice, and some of my personal story. This makes them more knowledgeable about the products I'm selling and the techniques I'm using.

These two things (becoming known and accessing knowledge) have propelled my career forward in ways I couldn't have imagined before social media.

As someone who finds marketing trends, business planning, and research to be fun, this isn't a difficult task for me to keep on top of. Although my posts don't take a long time to make or prepare, I do attempt to integrate them with a cohesive business approach. This means that

each social media post I make has a intent. Thus I put thought and reflection into the idea before I just do it.

I consider my photography and social media approach to be a craft too. I get better at throwing and decorating pottery each day because of repetition and practice. I also get better at photographing and integrating with social media services because I do it regularly, and with intention. Honing both of these crafts makes me a better small business owner, craftsman, and communicator.

Certainly one of the biggest benefits of social media is its broad impact on sharing information. As an artist I use social media as a reference to discover what other artists are doing. I learn about how kilns are fired, what glaze results are occurring, what workshops are being taught, new books that are released, new forms or clay bodies that are developing, and countless other things happening in our field.

Social media makes accessible to me today, for free, what would have cost me countless dollars or hours of time 10 years ago. As a recipient of so much goodwill I make my own effort to share what I've learned and pay it forward. I also believe that by sharing I am able to stay at the forefront of my own research areas. By sharing I also gather common questions, discern what is of the most interest, and open myself up to criticism. This helps me learn.

I primarily use social media to promote my work as a clay artist. I rarely make posts on my personal Facebook page, and I try to keep my Instagram feed full of images related to studio work. I don't post or repost social, political or religious topics that can be divisive except in some rare instances. I do post occasional images of my children, my family, or my food. I try to keep

these posts to a minimum both for privacy reasons, and also because I want my feed to stay focused on clay and studio work. I don't find this division to be difficult. I'm a private person so sharing personal information has never been something I'm compelled to do.

I don't feel that social media invades my personal life any more than other news media. I'm careful of what I post as it relates to my family and myself. Particularly, I don't want photos of my family released without due consideration of content and purpose. I'm concerned with online privacy and protection of my social media accounts, but also my banking, credit cards, on other online services that I'm a part of. I routinely feel like I'm a step behind on some of this, but I do my best to keep up and minimize my own risk. I'm still a small fish in a big pond of social media users.

I use Instagram to keep track of my own work as an artist. It's a digital archive of my work over the past years. I find this to be incredibly valuable. I can look back and see a record of what I've done, how I've grown, and what I've chosen to record. And I can do it anytime and anywhere. I also have a quality portfolio that's easily accessible to potential customers and supporters.

I see the lasting value of social media interactions especially in the ceramics field . Friendships that I've begun years ago through online “friending” have evolved into personal relationships built on real face-to-face interactions at conferences and workshops. Some of my favorite collaborative projects with other artists have begun with the tag of an Instagram photo or through a conversation developed on Facebook around a compelling image. These evolutions of the social media relationship continue on a regular basis.

Social media works when you put effort into it, just like any relationship. For me, as with most technology-related communications or even face-to-face relationships, I often feel like there's more to learn and more I could give, but I try not to mistake this for inadequacy; simply that when I put in effort, I know that effort will be rewarded. I will continue to strive towards kindness, consistency, honesty, and dedication in my relationships and my studio work.